

***Public Feedback on
A Report on
The Emergency Response
to Hurricane Juan***

February 2004


NOVA SCOTIA

**Public Feedback on A Report on the
Emergency Response to Hurricane Juan**



Highlights

Response Total: 27

By e-mail: 13

By letter: 1

By phone: 13 (8 calls received; 5 messages left on answering machine after business hours)

Response Locations (when voluntarily identified)

Halifax Regional Municipality (urban area): 11

Halifax Regional Municipality (rural area): 2

Hants County: 3

Colchester County: 2

Pictou County: 1

Cumberland County: 1.

Five people were seeking information or making comments not directly pertaining to the emergency response or the report. The majority (15) of the remaining 22 responses included at least some commentary focusing on Nova Scotia Power's handling of the emergency. Many people (7) said work crews deserved accolades but 11 said that management poorly handled information, making it difficult for customers to get accurate information about when to expect their power to be restored.

Nine responses included comments directed at general transmission of information. The most common suggestions (6) were that a 24-hour emergency radio system be developed or that existing radio stations provide more frequent advisories so the public can get up-to-date information during emergencies. Another common theme (4) was that community halls or other central areas be designated as emergency meeting places where up-to-date information and provisions/services could be obtained.

Other general themes covered by respondents included: hurricane warning systems, services during the emergency period and post emergency handling.

Introduction

On Tuesday, Dec. 2, 2003, Nova Scotia's Emergency Measures Organization (EMO) released a report documenting the province's emergency response to Hurricane Juan. The report summarizes the breadth, scope, strengths and weaknesses of the emergency response to the storm that claimed two lives and devastated large parts of Nova Scotia after making landfall early on Sept. 29, 2003.

A verbatim transcript of a debriefing session by members of the emergency measures network was also made available to the public via the Internet and at Access Nova Scotia Centres across the province.

As part of its ongoing efforts to improve response in all emergency situations, EMO ran advertisements in provincial newspapers and issued a news release that invited Nova Scotians to comment on the report and the transcript. Responses were welcomed by mail, e-mail or telephone between Dec. 2 and Dec. 31, 2003.

In all, 27 responses were received: one by mail, 13 by e-mail and 13 by telephone. Some people provided accounts of their specific experiences in the hours and days following the hurricane. Others offered a more general view of things done well and/or areas that needed improvement.

Although not all people identified their home communities, the comments appeared to reflect experiences in both urban and rural communities. Following is a breakdown of geographic areas voluntarily identified:

- Halifax Regional Municipality (urban area): 11
- Halifax Regional Municipality (rural area): 2
- Hants County: 3
- Colchester County: 2
- Pictou County: 1
- Cumberland County: 1.

Several people who responded to the request for feedback, were actually seeking information. Two Nova Scotians wanted to speak to someone about their financial claims. One wanted to know what to do with downed trees in their area and one wanted to know where a video of the damages might be acquired. One person also wanted to voice concerns that he was not hired to help with cleanup even though he is a qualified and currently unemployed worker.

The remaining 22 people offered sometimes extensive feedback, with some outlining in detail their personal experiences and others providing lists of suggestions. While most of the 22 provided some feedback (positive and/or negative) on efforts to restore electrical services, many respondents also referred to other efforts by government, non-government agencies and the private sector. Most comments fell within the following general themes: hurricane warning systems, provisions/services during the emergency period, transmission of information to the public, Nova Scotia Power, military involvement in the process and post emergency handling. Summaries of comments made in each category follow.

Hurricane Warning Systems

In the days immediately following the hurricane, there was much public debate about whether adequate warnings had been issued. Critics charged that Nova Scotians were unprepared for the severity of the storm because the warnings had not been sufficient. Others said the warnings had been adequate but that complacent Nova Scotians had not taken them fully to heart. Comments received in this process also reflected these views.

One person responded by e-mail that a news release on general hurricane preparedness, issued on Sept. 4 by EMO, was "not on the radar screens" for most Nova Scotians and that it was even more difficult to remain up to date because it was a weekend when many do not routinely pay as much attention to media reports.

One person suggested that a standard communications protocol be developed for advance warnings of storms and that it begin three days before a storm is expected to hit land. Another recommended that Nova Scotia improve relations with media sources to ensure that messages are well distributed. The American media's coverage was suggested as a role model to emulate, with someone saying U.S.-based media provide substantive warnings that include who needs to be evacuated, where to go and what to do.

Others criticized Environment Canada's forecasting and tracking systems, said phone lines are too often busy, that information is sometimes inadequate or misleading and difficult to put in context.

Still others, however, said they could not understand the confusion among the public. They said that marine and land weather forecasts properly noted that the hurricane was approaching, that the media had reported this adequately and had detailed supplies that people should have on hand. The public, one writer commented, would take the warnings more seriously in future.

One person also noted that it seemed inappropriate that the hurricane response centre was located on the seventh floor of a high rise and had to be evacuated during the worst of the storm.

Emergency Provisions and Services

Several people said they were concerned that there were no central places to find adequate emergency accommodation, information, or food. One person, whose apartment building in HRM was rendered uninhabitable, said it was difficult for the tenants to find information or assistance, and that no Red Cross advice was given for them as the newly homeless.

Several people took the opportunity to suggest that common emergency meeting areas be designated throughout the province so people know in advance where they will be able to find up-to-date information. It was suggested that, in rural areas, community halls or fire departments could be used and that each designated meeting place, whether it be urban or rural, should be equipped with a generator.

Some people took this idea even further, suggesting that a better support system needs to be put in place so volunteers could be put to even better use more quickly. They also suggested central volunteer recruitment, assessment and distribution facilities.

Development of predesignated and up-to-date lists were suggested for: 1) service stations with backup power capabilities 2) retail outlets for food, batteries 3) radio stations 4) refrigerated trailers available for food storage and 5) community halls.

Another person said EMO needs to better control the general supply of propane, generators, stoves, water, batteries, candles, wiring boxes, electricians, and do more to deter price gouging.

Transmission of Information

Hurricane Juan left thousands of trees uprooted, homes damaged and 300,000 customers from HRM through the northeastern part of the province without electrical service. While a discussion of information specifically about power restoration will be dealt with in the section pertaining to Nova Scotia Power, people responding to this request for information noted that emergency information of other kinds also needed to be conveyed more effectively.

Several residents in the Truro area, for example, said they were without area radio services for an extended period and therefore had little idea of what to do in the wake of the storm. Some others also noted that emergency-related information should have been available on a 24-hour basis in the days following the hurricane but was inadequately provided by private radio stations and by the CBC. One complained specifically that the local CBC radio station cut away to national service at the regular time instead of staying on local programming the day after the hurricane.

Although one person noted the EMO should consider providing emergency information to rural areas by door-to-door flyers, the majority of the nine people who commented upon this subject said EMO should explore methods of providing either more regular emergency updates or an emergency radio system available to residents right across the province in times of distress. One suggested that the emergency radio system should provide updates every 15 minutes on power outages, repairs and resources that are available.

One other comment regarding the transmission of information was more specific. An emergency communications co-ordinator with the Department of Transportation and Public Works was concerned about some information released by EMO in a verbatim transcript of the debriefing session. He said while a verbatim transcript demonstrates openness to the public, it can also provide pieces of information that are either incorrect or misleading.

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The writer was particularly concerned that the verbatim transcript released on Dec. 2, 2003 did not properly acknowledge that Nova Scotia has had one of "the very few fully integrated public safety radio communications systems in North America" since 2000-01. This system allows provincial, federal and municipal authorities, including the RCMP and municipal police departments, to share pertinent emergency information. "To their credit," the writer said, "Aliant kept the radio communications system fully operational almost continuously throughout the week following the hurricane when commercial power was not available in many of the remote locations of communications tower sites."

Nova Scotia Power

Nova Scotia Power's response to Hurricane Juan was, by far, the most common theme discussed in the responses, with 15 of 22 responses commenting on the positive and negative aspects of the company's efforts.

NSP crew members who worked repairing downed lines came in for the highest praise with 7 people noting and praising their efforts.

But people were not happy with the communications efforts at the power company. Eleven people criticized internal and external efforts, citing outdated call centre messages, inaccessible telephone lines and lack of specific information as primary irritants.

Many people said customers found it nearly impossible to determine when their power might be restored. Some said internal organization was the primary problem; that NSP itself did not seem to know which areas had been restored and that work crews were inefficiently deployed to some streets on several occasions to work on separate problems. One seemed to summarize references by several people by writing that generalized information on short power outages is fine but power customers expect, and should have been able to get, more specific and accurate information on repairs as time progressed.

Three people took the opportunity to outline specific cases in which they believed the response to their individual situations was ineffectually handled without good reason.

One person, however, had nothing but appreciation and compliments for NSP's communication process. The caller said she is on a breathing apparatus and that Nova Scotia Power usually advises her if there is reason to believe there may be a power outage. The caller said NSP workers called her before, during and after Juan to monitor her situation and that she was most appreciative.

Other items discussed relating to Nova Scotia Power included:

- one complaint regarding downed wires after power restored;
- two comments that poor limbing of trees and year-round maintenance made damages worse;
- three people commenting on staff cutbacks exacerbating the difficulties and
- one person noting that some of the downed transmission towers appear to have been in areas with no trees and wondering if there may now be weak links in an area vulnerable to high winds.

Military

Several people offered comments about the use of Department of National Defence staff during cleanup and repair procedures. Some believed military crews were improperly deployed and would benefit from improved scheduling and co-ordination so they would service those in most need. Others said the military should have been helping individuals, not being used to clear parks and public grounds. One said military members should not have been clearing roadways until they had gone door to door to make sure that occupants of all homes in rural areas were safe.

Post-Emergency

The emergency response to a natural disaster such as Hurricane Juan does not end when the immediate crisis is over. Several people reported items that can best be described as handling of post-emergency response.

As mentioned in the Transmission of Information category, one person was concerned about EMO's release of a verbatim transcript of its debriefing session. But another was pleased by the "timely" public report assessing emergency responses and a third believed that public hearings should have been held to get public input.

One person said financial aid programs were inadequate and that no one fit the criteria. Another suggested that work needs to be done on ways to move traffic more easily in HRM during emergencies while another had high praise for an insurance company that had been particularly supportive.

The final damage tally attracted attention from one person who also wanted to know how much money the federal government has contributed to repairs. That person also complained that the provincial Department of Natural Resources changed fire permit processes in the days after Juan, making it difficult for large property owners to clear damaged lands.

Miscellaneous

One person used the occasion to chastize politicians for using trips to survey damaged areas for their own political gain at the expense of taxpayers.

Another took the opportunity to mention specific pleasure that advanced planning had ensured a diesel-powered backup for water pumping system.

Several people commented that it seemed rural areas did not receive the same attention to recovery as HRM. Several others had praise for the overall process, sending accolades to EMO for its overall work.

